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SPORTING SCENE

THE SHORT, IMPRESSIVE LIFE OF THE FIRST PRESIDENTIAL-ELECTION VIDEO GAME

By Charles Bethea October 6, 2015



Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale, in 1984. Photograph by Ron Edmonds/AP

In 1978, after finishing a tour in the Army with the 82nd Airborne Division, Nelson Hernandez enrolled at Marshall University, in West Virginia, where he took an entry-level computer-science course. A year and a half later, having become proficient in the BASIC programming language, he read about Apple's latest offering: the Apple II+. In August of 1980, he bought one of the clunky machines. "I remember it cost me eighteen hundred dollars," Hernandez, who is fifty-nine years old and lives in Austin, Texas, told me recently. "A tremendous sum for a college student on an

A few months later, while watching television on Election Night, Hernandez was "enthralled" by the United States map turning different colors as Jimmy Carter and, far more often, Ronald Reagan seized state after state. He decided to try creating a graphic of a U.S. map on his computer. After much work, having succeeded, he then attempted to make each state turn red or blue. "Once that was working," he said, "I began to build a game around the map, essentially starting with what we see at the conclusion of a general election and working my way backward in terms of game design. It was an amateur, slapdash, one-man affair, nothing like video games we see now," which can involve dozens or hundreds of people and the resources of publicly traded companies. (In recent decades, the production of video games has become similar to the making of movies.)

But this was only the beginning. Just twenty-four years old at the time, Hernandez had nonetheless been an avid follower of politics since the 1968 Presidential campaign—"Who could forget those televised images from Chicago?"—and had read Theodore White's classic "The Making of the President 1960," as well as the political writings of Garry Wills. That background, he said, "plus some number-crunching research in the Marshall campus library," provided the framework of a computer game. After three months of "tinkering," in early 1981, Hernandez presented a finished product to Joel Billings, the twenty-three year-old head of nascent war-game developer Strategic Simulations. (Nineteen years later, Strategic Simulations was acquired by the video-game giant Ubisoft.)

"Although we were far from each other on the political spectrum, we found a way to enjoy working together," Billings told me. "His game was pretty amazing when you consider the number crunching it was doing at a time when the floppy disk contained only about 180K" of formatted media. Using basic policy positions, the game calculated every candidate's political leanings on a numerical scale: zero represented an absolute conservative while a hundred was a pure liberal. According to Billings, Hernandez was a "three per cent, or max conservative," on the scale at the time, while Billings was a "sixty per cent," or a moderate liberal.

The game, *President Elect*, was released in July of 1981, just three months after Hernandez had finished it. It simulated the final nine weeks of a Presidential campaign, from Labor Day to Election Night. Any election from 1960 through 1984 could be played out again, with the user acting as campaign manager, essentially, for a pre-programmed candidate—Jesse Helms, Geraldine Ferraro, George Romney—or an imagined one. New candidates were created by answering twenty-one questions about economic, social, and foreign policy—How does your candidate feel about the Cold War?—and then assigning scores, from one to ten, reflecting his or her speaking ability, poise, and personal magnetism. If you wanted to alter the historical scenario, you could tweak six external variables: inflation, unemployment, G.D.P. growth, war or peace, the mood of the country, and incumbency status.

Once a candidate was chosen, the player guided him or her through a series of decisions during the course of nine turns: Where should the candidate travel abroad after declaring? How many "political-action points" should be spent on advertising? How will the campaign deal with random events, such as economic reports and national disasters?

"It was quite primitive," Hernandez said, "but for the dawn of the computer age, the predictive results seemed miraculous." In 1984, the game predicted a huge landslide for Ronald Reagan in almost every scenario short of a national disaster. Sure enough, Reagan won forty-nine states and came within a few thousand votes of winning Minnesota, which was the home state of his opponent, Walter Mondale.

Some criticized the game for being biased toward conservative candidates like Reagan. "But in reality," Hernandez told me, "you had one of the most magnetic Presidents of the century against a below-average politician, in an economy that was roaring in 1984. The country's mood was much more optimistic. So that year's outcome was extremely predictable." Ray Charles sang at the Republican National Convention that year. "The game didn't simulate the Ray Charles effect," Hernandez joked. "So, if anything, it was biased toward the Democrats."

entertainment-software corporation in the world in five years. "I thought he was nuts," Hernandez said. "Anyway, I was legally bound to the Army for another three years, so it was out of the question." The guy on the phone was Trip Hawkins, the founder of Electronic Arts—also known as E.A. Games—which is now one of the largest gaming companies in the world.

President Elect became something of a cult favorite, selling forty-five thousand copies through its final iteration, in 1987, before Strategic Simulations discontinued it. In President Elect '88, players could pick from sixty-nine pre-programmed Presidential candidates, including Joseph Biden, Bill Clinton, and Oliver North. It was also made available for the Commodore 64, the Atari ST, and computers running DOS, as well as the old Apple II. As the blogger Douglas Kern, a devotee of the game, wrote, years later, "Who needs Nintendo when you can watch Pat Robertson shoot down George McGovern in a 1984 Presidential debate?"

Hernandez bemoans the current state of Presidential politics, which he called a "high-stakes reality-game show." "I most lament the complete absence of intellectualism in campaigns," he said. Still, he said that he believes, with some adjustments, *that President Elect* could simulate the 2016 election: "I never appreciated what a great franchise I had and all the things that could have been done to elaborate the game design with the help of a better programmer." Hernandez told me that, at this point, he thinks he could only be a "spiritual leader" for someone like Nate Silver, who could improve the predictive aspects of the game, while others could update its design by incorporating the changing demographics of the electorate, campaign financing, and other facets of contemporary campaign management. "Probably you'd need to design the game so that you could toggle different complicating elements: easy enough for a child or deep enough for a political scientist. But, absolutely, it could work."

Other Presidential simulation games have appeared since President Elect, including Balance Of Power, Shadow President, CyberJudas, Commander in Chief, SuperPower, and Democracy. Most of them put the player in the role of President and take much longer to complete. "As a piece of software, you might argue that President Elect is superior to those other games," Mike Knotts, a writer and game reviewer for the Web site Geekometry, told me. "It takes a complex subject and turns it into an approachable and fun game that is also a very deep and sophisticated simulation."

In Hernandez's view, the two most important factors in an election—both of them too subjective to be easily quantified—are a candidate's magnetism and the country's mood. "This cycle, the Democrats have a dearth of magnetic candidates," he said. "Senator Sanders and Vice-President Biden are roughly at par and, in my estimation, average at best. Senator Clinton, on the other hand, is above average in public speaking and less prone to gaffes. But her magnetism is the worst of any Democratic nominee since Michael Dukakis."

As for the candidate who has received the most press coverage, Hernandez said, "Mr. Trump is a special case that breaks any algorithm I devised in the early eighties. He has high magnetism but is terribly gaffe-prone. His speaking ability—a proxy for his debating skill—is average, which is to say, polarizing. But ideologically he is a cipher. Where things break down for Trump is that there are so many people who intensely dislike him for his perceived lack of substance or his brash New York style. My game could not possibly conceive a candidate such as he winning the G.O.P. nomination."

Pressed to pick one someone who could, Hernandez, who is now a financial analyst, mostly demurred. "We cannot know what the mood will be in November, 2016," he said. "We cannot know if the economy will hold together or sink into recession; we cannot know if some world event will change our focus, usually on economic and domestic matters, to foreign policy or matters of war and peace. On the whole, though, the G.O.P. seems to have the candidates to win. I believe the eventual G.O.P. ticket will consist of—pick two, in any order—Carson, Rubio, and Fiorina."

Some aging fans of President Elect wish that they had an updated version of the game to play out such predictions. "So much has changed in twenty-seven years," Douglas Kern told me. "A new version of the game is sorely needed. But then,

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